

MAYOR SHEILA DIXON'S 2007 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

February 5, 2007

President Rawlings Blake,

Members of the Council,

It is great to be back in this chamber, the place where I began my public service to the citizens of Baltimore.

I want to say to the members of this council, I have a lot of fond memories of our time and our work together.

I look forward to continuing that relationship.

State Comptroller Franchot,

Comptroller Pratt,

State's Attorney Jessamy,

Other Distinguished Guests,

Family and Friends,

And most importantly, the citizens of Baltimore.

Thank you for inviting me here this afternoon.

It was here as president of the Baltimore City Council that I fought for the issues I believed in -

It was here that I led the effort that resulted in the creation of a \$60 million Affordable Housing program to support the dreams and aspirations of hard working Baltimoreans.

I also worked very hard to open wider the doors of opportunity for minority and women owned small businesses ensuring their talents and gifts were put to work for the city of Baltimore. I intend to ensure that continues to happen.

Just over two weeks ago, I had the honor of becoming the 48th Mayor of Baltimore.

The city where I was born and raised, received a public education and where I took the first steps to become a public servant.

When I took the oath of office, I promised you that I would lead a government that solved problems.

It is my pleasure to tell you that my team has hit the ground running and this afternoon I am pleased to report that the State of our city is strong - and getting stronger each and every day.

Yes, there are challenges and there is much work to be done, but working together - there is no problem or issue too great for us to overcome.

William Jennings Bryant said, "Destiny is not a matter of chance; but a matter of choice."

Together, let us choose to live in a cleaner, greener and healthier city.

Let us choose to work in a city where private investment and opportunity flourish in every neighborhood, every Main Street, and every business district.

And let us choose to raise our children in a city that values public education; for only the educated are truly free.

As I have traveled throughout this city, I have witnessed first hand a renewed energy - people from every corner of Baltimore offering their advice, their suggestions and, most importantly, asking what they can do to help Baltimore become the city we dream of.

Someone once said, "Dreams are like stars, you may never touch them, but if you follow them, they will lead you to your destiny."

Today, I ask you to walk with me in charting a new destiny for Baltimore.

But before we can even begin to have an honest and frank conversation about a cleaner, greener, and healthier Baltimore, we need to first, be a smarter Baltimore. A better educated Baltimore.

My mother taught me many lessons.

One of the most important was that the key to my future rested in getting a good quality education.

We need to be a City that values the role education will play in taking us to the next level. Government, Parents, and Students must all value it.

Too often we read negative things about our young people. Especially African American males.

It is my pleasure to introduce to you two outstanding Baltimore young people.

Carl Ringgold was a page for the city council in a program I created to bring young people into City Hall to see how government works.

He worked extremely hard and I was always impressed with his dedication to the tasks he was assigned.

This fall Carl will become a freshman at Morehouse College, one of the premiere historically black colleges and universities in the country.

The Baltimore Youth Commission advises the Mayor and City Council about issues of importance to young people.

They take their responsibilities very seriously and I value the things they share with me. I want to introduce the chair of the Baltimore Youth Commission Chantel Clea.

I am very proud of these young people.

That new destiny I spoke of a few minutes ago, has at its core, a school system where all children, regardless of where they live and the economic status of their families - receive a quality education that prepares them to do more than simply survive - I want to equip the next generation of Baltimore students with the skills to thrive!

Today, I am pleased to announce that I have created, at the suggestion of a hardworking and very thorough transition team, a new division within the Mayor's office that will lead our efforts to transform Baltimore's education system.

Within the Mayor's Office of Education and LEARN Initiatives, the Assistant Deputy Mayor for Education will be charged with implementing the LEARN section of the City's Comprehensive Master Plan.

The Office will work with our leaders, parents, teachers, students, foundations, businesses, and state and national funders to get beyond finger pointing to a place where we put our students and their needs before any thing else.

You know this, but it is worth repeating. When parents and caregivers are involved in the life of a child and a school, that child and that school is more likely to have higher test scores, higher graduation rates and less violence.

This Office will also work with organizations such as the Baltimore Collegetown Network to implement the recommendations within the Master Plan that call for stronger, mutually beneficial partnerships with our fourteen institutions of Higher Education.

I am particularly interested in partnerships with the public, community and charter schools of our city, as well as partnerships with our city agencies.

Baltimore is blessed to have some of the most respected colleges and universities in the world. I am asking them to invest their talented staffs, their administrative experiences and their exceptional knowledge about how children learn and grow into helping me equip administrators, teachers and students with every tool they need to be successful.

I will not accept that our children can not learn!

I will not accept that our children don't deserve every opportunity to succeed.

And I believe all of us have a role to play in making our school system a leader in the state, and in the nation again. We can do this!

As we move our educational efforts forward, we must confront and defeat challenges that threaten to pull us back. One of these challenges is the toxic danger of lead poisoning.

Lead poisoning is a cruel larceny. It can steal a child's ability to grow up healthy, to learn, to earn, and to play.

Over the last decade, we have seen the numbers of children in Baltimore poisoned by lead fall by more than 90 percent.

We must finish the job.

I support the national goal of ending lead poisoning as a public health crisis by the year 2010.

The key to reaching this goal can be summed up in one word: prevention.

We must prevent lead poisoning ... rather than react only after a child has already been poisoned, when it is too late.

That's why I have asked Dr. Sharfstein, our health commissioner and Janis Parks, the head of the Family League to cross-train all home visitors for pregnant women and newborn babies to identify lead hazards ... and take steps to avert tragedy. I am pleased to report that this effort is already underway.

I and my staff will also work with the city council to review all of our lead laws and regulations.

We need to be sure that when an apartment poses a serious risk of poisoning a child, we take action.

To that end, I have directed Commissioner Graziano to set aside vouchers to immediately assist in relocating children and families exposed to lead poisoning.

A growing concern is the number of children poisoned in owner-occupied homes and apartments. We must work together to find new resources to help abate these risks.

Ending lead poisoning is not just a task for city government. I look forward to working closely with partners like the Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, agencies like the Maryland Department of the Environment, and new collaborators in the private sector.

It is what we can do together that will make the difference.

Having served more than 20 years in public office, I know that feeling safe and secure in your home and in your community is a major concern for the citizens of Baltimore.

We have made progress in mediating violence and crime in our city, but speaking frankly, we have a long, long way to go.

I want to be very clear about this point.

I have full faith and confidence in the men and women of law enforcement in the City of Baltimore.

There are few nobler callings than the oath taken by our police officers to protect and defend the citizens of our city.

Working with police commissioner Leonard Hamm, I am calling for a new relationship between our officers and the neighborhoods where they serve.

Sometimes it's not about trying a new theory or strategy; sometimes it's about common sense.

We have to get back to the days when officers knew the people who lived in the communities they patrolled and the people in the community knew and trusted the officers that worked in their neighborhood.

Making our communities safer will take citizens and the police working together - not against each other.

However, new times do call for policing in a different way. Commissioner Hamm will be using every technological tool available to law enforcement to be smart and effective in fighting crime and violence.

Through the use of our COMSTAT system, we will have the ability to map gang and juvenile crime and violence specifically to the areas where they are occurring the most. We will then focus our resources like a laser beam on those communities plagued by this violence.

Not only will these areas get targeted patrolling, but we will develop profiles of these communities and begin to address the needs of the people who live there.

If unemployment, rehabilitation services and a lack of educational opportunities are contributing to the ongoing culture of violence in neighborhoods, then working together, the police department and other agencies will offer additional resources and, more importantly, an infusion of hope.

Commissioner Hamm and I will stand with all of the neighborhoods of this city. A safer Baltimore is our goal and I'm determined we will be successful.

I am pleased to announce today that I have re-established the Mayor's Office on Criminal Justice and I have asked Sheryl Goldstein to lead that Office. Sheryl's local, national, and international work in mediation, court innovation and other criminal justice issues has prepared her well for the work ahead of us. Welcome Sheryl.

The efforts of law enforcement to cut crime, stop gang activity and eliminate the drug trade will not work unless they are coordinated throughout city government and in partnership with the state and federal levels to address the roots of crime and not just the acts of crime.

Thousands of Baltimoreans return to our city each year from incarceration.

We must do a better job at preparing these citizens to re-enter our communities. That preparation must begin before they leave the criminal justice institutions and must be comprehensive enough to provide help and assistance to them throughout their journey to re-entry.

It is obvious to me; we can not allow people to simply be dropped off on corners in Baltimore without any sense of direction or hope. The Baltimore Citywide Ex-offenders Taskforce has done the hard work. We know what needs to be done.

I am pleased to announce that my Office on Criminal Justice will work with this City Council to move forward funding and implementation of the 26 recommendations within the Taskforce's Report. It's smarter and more fiscally and morally responsible to act now.

Furthermore, the Office of Criminal Justice will coordinate my other executive agencies: the Mayor's Office of Employment Development, the Baltimore Health Department, the Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development and the Baltimore City Police Department to begin to work together to address the issues of unemployment, lack of healthcare and housing and other issues that make some believe they have no viable choices but to participate in criminal activity.

I have also instructed the police department to establish a division that deals solely with outreach to juveniles. Not just those who have already become part of the criminal justice

system, but we must touch the lives of young people before they make the bad choices that will impact their entire lives.

To further support these efforts, and to increase public safety within our City, I have instructed my Finance Department to find the resources to increase the number of staff in our recreation centers. If we give young people alternatives, I am convinced they will do the right thing.

If we do not get to them now, gangs, drug dealers and career criminals will.

Time is of the essence and we do not have a moment to lose.

However, it has been said, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can not make it drink."

Today, I am pledging that government will do its part to offer opportunities to those who want to break out of the cycle of crime, drugs, guns and violence. But the final choice will be up to those who have engaged in this activity, many for most of their lives.

If they choose not to become productive and contributing citizens of Baltimore, law enforcement will do its job.

The problem of homelessness confronts us everyday.

We are in the middle of a Baltimore winter and the temperatures are dropping lower and lower each night.

Some people have told me it's impossible to fix this problem. It's too expensive to ensure shelter for all people.

I would argue that the costs associated with providing medical services and other resources to the homeless in Baltimore are too expensive as well.

But at the end of the day, for me, it's not about the costs associated with homelessness that pricks at my heart. It is my sense of responsibility to my fellow man that compels me to act.

I am committed to ending homelessness in Baltimore within the next 10 years.

To help me reach my goal of ending homelessness in Baltimore, I am pleased to introduce the new director of Homeless Services, Diane Glauber.

Diane is a national expert on housing and homelessness who has worked for the last four years directing national initiatives to create and expand affordable housing.

Diane, welcome aboard. I'm looking forward to working with you to do our part to restore dignity and hope to our fellow citizens.

As many of you know, the development of our neighborhoods has always been one of my priorities.

The city's new Master Plan provides a blue print going forward for every community in Baltimore. But a plan does us no good unless it is implemented.

We sometimes forget that the agency that we have grown accustomed to calling Baltimore Housing is legally named the Department of Housing and Community Development. It is time to put the C - D back in HCD.

Under Commissioner Graziano's direction, the housing department will create a new leadership position that focuses on building and sustaining healthy neighborhoods.

I am pleased to announce that Jackie Cornish, who served with distinction as the Executive Director of the Druid Heights Community Development Corporation, has agreed to serve as the housing department's new Deputy Commissioner for Neighborhood Investment.

Under a new structure soon to be announced by Commissioner Graziano, the Housing Department will create a team of experienced project managers who will be responsible for partnering with community development corporations and neighborhood groups to implement neighborhood plans.

These project managers will coordinate and advocate for all aspects of neighborhood planning, whether it calls for more affordable housing, a new park or cleaner streets.

This team will help communities and government work together to solve problems. Not just to see that the conversations begin, but to maintain strong lines of communication and face-to-face time with neighborhood leaders to ensure that any hurdles and problems are addressed immediately.

We can never forget who we work for. We work for you, the citizens of Baltimore.

The Housing and Community Development Department has also been directed to get a plan to me within 30 days to create a land bank in Baltimore. Talked about for years, a land bank will allow us to quickly return city owned property to productive use. Its mission will be to strengthen neighborhoods, not maximize profits.

Having housing stock maintained in a computer on a list somewhere in the government bureaucracy doesn't serve citizens or government well. We can do better, and we will.

I also know that property assessments have begun to arrive in your mail boxes. As a homeowner in Baltimore, I know what a difficult burden many of our citizens face.

Too many people have said to me personally that they are making a conscience decision to live and raise their families in Baltimore and they feel like they are being punished for doing so.

Today, I am announcing the creation of a Blue Ribbon Panel on Real Estate Taxes. Working with this Council, in the coming days I will share with you a list of some of the city's brightest and most committed citizens who will be tasked with helping me to establish concrete ways to cut the property taxes in our city.

I am proud to make this commitment to the citizens of Baltimore. It's long overdue and I will not rest until we've made lower property taxes a reality.

Economic and workforce development are priorities for my administration. To aggressively promote the employment connection between our City's job seekers and businesses that do business in the City, I am introducing a new Baltimore City Residents First Program.

This initiative will ensure that companies who are awarded City contracts have immediate access to a full range of professional employment services from our Office of Employment Development - recruitment, screening, assessment and training grants - to bring them the most qualified candidates to fill their job openings.

Increasing employment participation of city residents is good business and a means to improve our employment rate.

Today in my first State of the City Address let me speak directly to city employees for just a moment.

You are on the front lines.

You are the most important part of my Administration.

I will always make decisions based on what I think is in your best interests and in the best interests of the people of the city.

We must also support key industries and workers as they innovate to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

One of our key growth industries is health care. One way to support our health care institutions, our emergency preparedness, and the quality of our medical treatment is by enhancing the training of our health care workforce.

I am committed to collaborating with hospitals and unions, led by the Service Employees International Union, local 1199, to expand educational opportunities for healthcare workers in Baltimore - including those who work for the city.

One of my greatest joys as a public official is spending time with our senior citizens. They share wisdom and knowledge on every subject you can imagine and they are living testaments to the greatness that we come from.

I want the aging population of Baltimore to be able to enjoy life and to have all of the resources available to them to ensure they have a good quality of life. To that end, I want to commend the Commission on Aging and Retirement Education and director John Stewart for the creation of the Urban Aging Institute.

This institute helps us better meet the special needs of seniors who live in the city and gives them opportunities to stay active and informed on issues that impact them.

I recently took a ride with some of the members of DPW Director George Winfield's sanitation staff. I have to tell you, it was quite an adventure on a very cold and early morning.

But it also was a great learning experience.

I strongly believe that a clean city is a thriving city. If we allow trash and debris to clutter our streets, it says a lot about how we feel about our city and about ourselves.

Cities across the country are trying to figure how to address this issue. I want to do more than just study the problem - I want to solve it.

I want the employees of the Department of Public Works to know I believe they are doing a great job. But we can do better.

My Cleaner Baltimore Initiative calls on citizens and city employees to work together to keep our city clean.

The City must lead by example. Our properties and buildings must be kept as clean as possible, including our sanitation yards.

I have grown weary of seeing plastic bags hanging from trees and barb wire fences around the City. It is a small start, but I have instructed DPW to begin to look at alternatives to the wire fencing enclosing our properties. That fencing collects a horrible amount of bags and trash. In this new century, we certainly can do better. And in Baltimore, we will.

Again, government can not do it all alone. As citizens, we have to put our trash out on the right days. We must make sure our cans are secure and we have to honor the schedule for bulk pick up.

But I think this concept is even more basic than that.

When I was a girl growing up in Baltimore, it would have never crossed my mind to throw a can or bottle on the street. This initiative incorporates an educational component in it that will teach us to take pride in our community and not to trash it, literally.

We have to change the mind-set of some of our citizens. This is our city and it is our responsibility to take care of it.

Baltimore's major commuter routes serve as our gateways to our neighbors, tourists and visitors. They are the front door to our home and need to be as clean as possible.

This means, not only special attention by DPW, but also soliciting the corporate residents to become our partners in making the best impression possible at our gateways.

The public and private sectors working together to make a better Baltimore - that is a theme and a practice you will hear a lot about in the Dixon Administration.

I have directed Deputy Mayor Frank to develop a comprehensive plan that enlists all our agencies, neighborhood groups, businesses and foundations in a collective effort to clean up our city.

Within the next 30 days, we will invite community association leaders to City Hall, to listen to their ideas on how the city can best support their individual neighborhood clean up efforts.

Also, I want to thank the Baltimore Community Foundation for taking the lead in convening a Task Force in support of these efforts. In partnership with the Community Foundation and others, our plan will ensure that every citizen, neighborhood, business and institution knows what they can do to make our city shine.

Baltimore is blessed with a great park system that includes 6,000 acres of parkland. We also have 2.8 million trees that have a replacement value of \$3.4 billion dollars.

Many neighborhoods are home to community gardens and local pocket parks.

Parks can be assets to our neighborhoods by providing environmental benefits, attract businesses and strengthen communities.

Well-cared for green space and trees create real economic value and health benefits for people such as clean air and water, moderate air temperatures and reduced energy costs.

This wonderful infrastructure is aging, however, and we need to create new strategic partnerships with health, economic, education, recreation and sports, environmental and philanthropic initiatives to keep Baltimore beautiful.

We need to think of our city as a park and protect it - and its natural environment - as we do our most precious national treasures.

To this end, I am supporting the implementation of the urban tree canopy goal that will double our tree canopy over 30 years - and all partnerships that support a cleaner and greener city.

For a very long time, Baltimore has enjoyed strong relationships with the jurisdictions around us. We recognize that we are part of a strong and growing region and it's important for us to work together to reach our regional goals on transportation and traffic congestion and land use planning.

Maryland is changing and growing and Baltimore is ready to be a regional leader.

Within the next year, it is projected that Maryland will welcome more than 25,000 new households due to federal Base Realignment and Closure, known as BRAC.

I think many of these new families can find affordable housing, a compatible school for their children and a safe and beautiful neighborhood to call home right here in Baltimore.

We're blessed to have an organization in our city whose mission is to promote and celebrate city living. Today I am pleased to announce that we have joined with LIVE Baltimore to reach out to BRAC families.

In this partnership we will make a multi-year financial commitment to LIVE Baltimore to assist their efforts to market our city to these potential new residents.

At the center of a thriving region, Baltimore has the capacity and the need to grow.

I want to use every tool available to us to tell Baltimore's story to the world.

That's what LIVE Baltimore has been doing and I am excited about this new opportunity for us to work together.

A few weeks ago I attended a gathering of neighborhood leaders and art advocates at the Baltimore Museum of Art. It was a day to celebrate the role the arts can play in creating stable families and communities.

In Baltimore we have some of the most incredible arts institutions and organizations in the world. From dance ministries in church basements to after school photography clubs, from beautiful museums to jazz clubs, the arts is an important part of the life of our city.

Unfortunately, in these times of tight budgets and dwindling resources, too often our arts and cultural programs are the first on the chopping block.

This will not be so in my Administration.

As mayor I am proposing that the city set aside a significant amount of our financial resources to establish a grant program that is open to all of Baltimore's arts and cultural institutions.

It will be a program that is inclusive and has measurable outcomes and it will be a fair and open process.

We must match our words with our deeds and ensure that this important component of city life is both celebrated and funded.

I know that I have laid out an aggressive agenda for the first 10 months of my administration.

But I promised the citizens that I would be about the business of solving problems.

Today, I stand before you as someone who has never been more proud to be a Baltimorean.

In the face of great challenges, Baltimore has always risen to the occasion.

The Dixon Administration wants to start a conversation about out of the box ideas and solutions.

I want Baltimore to be a city that dares to ask "What if..."

What if we truly put our children first and created a school system that was the envy of the world?

What if we clean up the playgrounds and streets across this city?

What if we found a way to provide every man, woman and child a place to lay their head at night?

What if we put the dream of homeownership within reach for all Baltimoreans?

What if we made every Baltimore neighborhood cleaner, greener and healthier?

During my term as mayor, that's exactly what this city is going to do.

I am humbled by the people of Baltimore, whose perseverance and values have shown why this is a wonderful place to live, work and play.

We are a city of different neighborhoods, different religions, different races and different experiences.

But we are connected always by hope and the conviction that together we can make a better tomorrow.

Thank you and may God Bless Baltimore.